

## Sermon 103: Romans 9:19-21: Part Two: Suggesting some answers regarding God's sovereign election

### OUTLINE

Two wills  
Concurrence  
Sinful lump

### INTRODUCTION

I love the questions that are found in the bible, they are always so rich when an answer can be found. Think of Jesus question when He was dying on the cross, 'My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?' The answer when discovered is very profound, 'For me!' The portion before us is riddled with questions, some of them hypothetical, and some of them are anticipated objections raised against Paul's point that God is sovereignly saving some but not all. We have seen that Paul's method in dealing with these anticipated objections has been very different to what we would encounter in a public debate. Paul dodges the questions by zeroing in on the main issues that are being missed. We saw that with the question of injustice he switched topics to speak about mercy. And last week we looked at the question of responsibility and free will and how Paul felt it more necessary to deal with the heart attitude of the questioner than in giving a satisfying intellectual answer.

Now some might get the wrong impression, that we should never ask questions and just be content. Now contentment is necessary when we have looked at all of what the Word of God has had to say on the issue. The fact that Paul reasserts God's sovereignty and forces us to remember who we are dealing with may give you the impression that no answer can be had to the questions he was anticipating. Today, I would like to look at those questions in v19 and attempt some answers. This is not a case of Nick giving you his ideas but answers that the bible gives and have been believed by Christians for centuries, answers that are rooted in the text. The questions that were put forward are coming from a certain set of assumptions, in other words you would only ask those questions in those ways if you were already committed to certain beliefs. In this case we see that the questioner is uninformed with regards to certain fundamental beliefs. These are not necessarily intuitive for every person to grasp, in fact I would say that revelation and not reason would be the reason for believing them. So today I would like to attempt to engage with the questioner of v19-21 and highlight three truths that will alleviate some of the tension. Now let me make an important disclaimer, in attempting to answer your questions I do not believe that all questions must be answered, nor that all questions this side of eternity can be answered. Let me also forewarn you that the answers I am going to give you are not going to make you sit back and go, 'Ah, all my questions are fully satisfied, now I can rest content because I know all things.' In answering your questions all I am going to do is raise other questions so that you will leave this sermon with new questions that cannot be answered. But I do feel it is my duty to give you all the light possible on these difficult issues, to make every attempt to help you to see the glory and goodness of God in these mysteries. I think that

there are some very important lessons to learn by these answers because they are based purely on what the bible says and confront our logic and reason and demand they submit to revelation.

## Two Wills

Now this point is going to sound like a contradiction so let me prepare you by reminding you how we come to truth from the Scripture. Something has been impressed upon me quite strongly lately as I have had some email interchange with a Muslim about the deity of Christ, that Jesus is fully God. We believe that Jesus is fully man and fully God, not 50-50 but 100-100%. Now stop and think about this logically for a moment, just in terms of the standards that we would apply to normal and everyday things. God is timeless and does not age, Jesus aged. God is infinite and omniscience, Jesus was time and geographically bound. God sustains the universe, Jesus was sustained by a mother. God knows all things, Jesus did not know all things. God cannot be tempted, Jesus was tempted. Now as we analyse these statements from scripture and subject them to the common laws we would anything else, many have been tempted to find them wanting and to explain away one half or the other, or to water down one half to accommodate the other, or fuse and combine them. Here is where the constructing of Christian doctrine differs from all other ways of thinking. One of our most basic assumptions is that we are finite and do not know everything. This means we are dependent upon God to reveal the past, the future, and the spiritual realms. We cannot find God and cannot investigate Him. We are dependent upon Him to reveal truths to us. Now God has not revealed all truth, just snippets, but enough for us to get a picture of who He is and character, the fact that God is Trinity, etc. And this incomplete set of data might tempt you to want to deny one truth or the other as somehow contradictory. We accept the statements of Scripture even if they appear to contradict each other because we do not have a full set of facts and God has told us that all has not been revealed. Also the nature of the things that are revealed are related to eternal and infinite things that we have no experience of. We would never come up with doctrines like the Trinity, or the two natures of Christ by reason, there is no way we would rationalise such truths, we believe them on the basis of God's word, and we must apply this rationale to our further answers to the questions on election.

We want to suggest a line of biblical thinking that has a tension built into it but which asserts two apparently contradictory truths without one cancelling out the other, the two wills of God. Sam Storms states well the nature of the question in v19, *'If a person's hardness of heart is the work of a sovereign God, it is unrighteous and unfair for God to condemn the individual or to hold them accountable for their resistance to his commands. Whereas someone such as Pharaoh might resist God's will of precept (or command), in doing so he is in fact fulfilling God's will of purpose (or decree) Therefore, since no one can successfully resist the will of God's eternal and decretive purpose, it is wrong for God to find fault with their behavior. In other words, if God hardens the human heart, on what basis does He still hold the person morally accountable for his sin?'* The questioner has a simplistic and unbiblical view of the will of God, it does not have all the nuances that the Scripture forces us to reckon with. The questioner is implying that God willing the

hardening of a sinners heart makes Him the author of sin and go against His commandments, as well as our responsibility thinking that God's hardening removes our ability to choose and makes any accountability unreasonable. The bible's teaching on the two wills of God does not fully answer all the questions but it does help us review some bedrock assumptions that lead us into error.

Let me try and highlight the mystery in this way: Does God command us not to murder? Yes we find that in the 6<sup>th</sup> of the 10 Commandments. Now, did God will the murder of Christ? Yes He did, we see this in Acts 4:27-28, 'for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, 28 to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.' Does God approve of murdering the innocent, the deceit, the betrayal, the failure of the leaders of Israel, No, No, No! But was it all part of the will of God, Yes!

The two wills have been called God's decretive will and His perceptive will, in other words, those things that God purposed from eternity past and those things which He commands. Here is another example, one that relates directly to Romans 9. Did God command Pharaoh to let His people go? Yes, Ex. 4:21-23. Did God harden Pharaoh's heart that he would not let God's people go? Yes, this is Paul's whole point. So did God will something different to His commands? Yes! Now here you are left with a choice, you can either accept the tension on the basis of the fact that you don't have all the info, trusting in God's character, and accepting this tension without trying to deny that God has a will of command and will of purpose. Or you can accuse God of being the author of sin, you have to say it is contradictory or a mystery, the plain statements cannot be avoided.

Another classic example is Revelation 17:17, we know that God hates it when His people are persecuted, and yet we see Him moving to do just that, 'for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and handing over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God are fulfilled.' The bible is unembarrassed to offer both sides and stress the two wills of God. The Scriptures are not making a philosophically consistent case for God's workings that all men can test and it will satisfy all logical requirements. The Scriptures stress that God is holy, He has commandments that must be obeyed, but where sin is reigning God is not kicked off His throne He is ruling.

How does this views of two wills help in our discussion of election? Some people make assumptions rationalising about the hidden will of God based on a one sided view of God's will looking only at the revealed will of God, if God commands all men everywhere to repent, this must mean that He decrees to save all and the doctrine of election is therefore untrue. The logic sounds simple enough but we have just demonstrated that God commands things He does not necessarily decree. Others have made the mistake of thinking that if God commands it, faith and repentance, we must be able to do it and therefore we do have a free will and the teaching of total inability is false. Both of these mistakes result when we abandon the truth of the two wills of God, neither of them takes account of the nuanced depth of the biblical teaching which must be kept in tension. Both rationalise from one side

of the set of information instead of taking the two wills into account. When it comes to the questioner of Romans 9, the two wills of God attack his assumption that if God wills to harden He cannot then hold us accountable by what He has commanded, the truth is, He can. The power of this argument is not its ability to answer all questions but in its ability to remove wrong questions. Questions that assume God is the author of sin, or that deny He is control when sin is happening, or that He most certainly does elect and harden. All of these questions are challenged and shown to be insufficient and not accounting for all the biblical data on these issues. We find the same thing when we talk about the 2 natures of Christ. If we take only side of evidence that speaks of His humanity, e.g. He had to pray, eat, could die, was limited in knowledge and was dependent upon the Spirit for power, you would be forced to conclude that Jesus is not God. However, if you take all that the bible says about Jesus and realise that we do not have all the info but enough that we can see He is indeed God, and that He was a true man, these two apparently contradictory truths hold us back from error, though they do not give us all the answers we would like and could ask. It may be an incomplete set of truths, but there is no denying they are biblical and useful to reject error, although not fully disclose all truth.

## Concurrence

The next truth is one that we have touched on several times before but is necessary to bring in at verse 19 because of a wrong assumption in the questioner. Paul anticipates someone objecting to the doctrine of sovereign hardening on the basis of the fact that because God forces us, He irresistibly compels us, this would nullify all responsibility. The teaching of concurrence is the second truth we need to bring in to refute this wrong assumption. Many assume that if we teach that God sovereignly hardens and saves whom He wills He is somehow doing so at the expense of the creature's will, denying our basic humanity and making robots or computers out of us.

Once again when asking the question 'who is willing' we have two sets of data. We are shocked to find that the bible without embarrassment makes the statement that both God and man are active, as much as in good as in evil, and yet God is not the author of sin. That both God and the devil are active, yet God is not the author of sin, nor is there an abandoning of secondary means nor is there a violation of the will of the creature. I have made reference to this before so let me just use one example to remind us of the truth.

Genesis 50:20, 'As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.' We must notice as we look at this verse that both man and God are said to be intentionally acting. Joseph's brothers freely chose the wrong of selling Joseph into slavery, but God was sovereignly taking Joseph to Egypt that He might use him to save Egypt and his family. God did not make the brothers will the evil, they did it freely out of the sin that was already in their own hearts, God did not have to place a deposit of sin to influence them, they were born sinners. Joseph's brothers acted freely as far as their decisions were concerned but they did not act freely as far as God's purposes were concerned, even in the case of their willing evil, God

was in control and working all things, not only reactively but proactively according to His will.

What is the use of this truth in the issues we are looking at? When Paul says that God hardens sinners you might get the wrong impression and think that God is putting evil into the hearts of men, that the men are not freely pursuing the sin that is already in their hearts. And if you are willing to acknowledge that you might go to the other extreme and suggest that God is not sovereign and not in control and that the events were not in God's will or power.

### Sinful lump

There are two charges that have been levelled at the teachings of God's election as we have understood them from the scriptures. Some think that the doctrine of God to sovereignly and freely distinguish who He will save and who He will damn leads to the charge of arbitrariness and the view that God creates people to kill them, that they are born to burn. These charges have been taken very seriously by those who believe in sovereign election, the whole reason why they do so is because they are zealous for God's glory shown in His plan and power and in particular in His causing His will to come to pass in mercy and hardening. And those who have had this concern have also sought an answer in the text. Now let me warn you, I will illuminate those parts of the text which are highlighted that are put forward to remove this accusation, but we will see that all the answer does is change the question because we do not have total disclosure from God on these issues.

The argument goes something like this. When Paul uses the analogy of the potter and the clay, he is borrowing more than the analogy but the fact that in Jeremiah 18:1-6 the clay pot was ruined before it was remade. So that when Paul refers to the lump of humanity in v21 he is not referring to a neutral or sinless humanity but humanity as fallen Adam. Now please note an important difference here to the way that Arminians would view a text like this. God is not looking forward in time to learn about the fall of man and then react to that fall. Reformed expositors acknowledge that the fall was all part of God's eternal decree. The necessity of this interpretation they say is to avoid a reading which implies that God makes things in order to destroy them. In other words, they are very concerned that the bible not be made to say that God creates people in order to destroy them without any account of sin. The difficulty with this view is that although the text may be saying that God hardens from a fallen lump of humanity, but this just pushes back the question by one degree to, 'Why didn't God decide to save all of humanity,' or 'why didn't God decide to not let the lump fall at all.' The apparent implication of arbitrariness cannot be fully evaded. And not only for the Calvinist but for the Arminian as well. The Arminian will have to admit that according to their theological view of a foreseen faith, God is more willing that people have a free will than that they be saved; and that God knowing full well who would believe and who wouldn't still chose to create those who would not believe to go to hell. The view is not free from difficulties but let me illuminate further.

Firstly, those who hold this view claim that God's determination to save is totally unconditional, but that God's determination to finally harden anyone is on account of their sinfulness in Adam. They would say that the U in TULIP is only with regards to election to salvation but hardening is a judicial response to the sin that would be had in Adam. Secondly, the exegetical basis for this view is quite strong. As already indicated Paul is borrowing from Jer. 18:1-6 the analogy of a ruined lump of clay that God has to the right to remake as He pleases. Also I think it has been well argued that the notion of a vessel of wrath and a vessel of mercy both being taken from the same lump sounds very much like the two twins coming out of the one mother. In other words, the idea of a neutral lump of clay is not envisioned but two bowls from a common sinful source. Thirdly, please here the correct concern. No informed view believes that God elects people to go to hell, and the reason they are in hell is because God elected it to be so. This view is concerned to demonstrate that hell is always a judgement for sin, that people are finally thrown into hell for their sin, in other words, the legal basis for their being in hell is their own sins what they did in their lives not God's election. That God's decree would be the first cause in the whole causal chain is affirmed but let us not misrepresent the case by saying 'elected to hell'. Hell is always a judgement upon personal sin, the legal grounds for hell are not election but your sins.

So let me ask you now, are you fully satisfied is all your intellectual curiosity sated? I volunteer to you that we have just about come to the end of what we are able to say on these matters, there is little more that we can look into to determine God's motives and what informed His decisions, we are left high and dry faced with a choice. You can accept the statements of Scripture even though they do not fully make sense to you, suspending a rational judgement accepting that you are not infinite, you have no right to weigh God and He has not revealed all that we would like to know but only what we need to know. Or you can be discontent with your portion, you can demand more satisfying answers, you can try and argue that logic is the final arbiter not what is revealed in the word.

I want to leave you with some final thoughts. Firstly, we are small and the bible only gives us a glimpse of the whole picture. We must therefore treat the doctrines of election as we would any other doctrine which violates our ordinary sense of logic. We submit to it acknowledging that we are in need of teaching and cannot judge. Secondly, we accept these partial pictures by faith, trusting in God's character where He has been revealed and waiting patiently for the final answer, if He ever chooses to give it. Thirdly, resist the temptation to be more authoritative than the word. When you come across verses that teach two sides of a doctrine like the divine and human natures of Christ and you want to try and smooth it all out and make things look neat. Resist! Resist making God conform to your logic, we will seek next week that God is not arbitrary, and we must also resist accusing God of creating people to be born to born if election is true, you aren't equipped to judge God. Fourthly, and finally let me draw your attention to Paul's own attitude when confronted with these mysteries. Turn to Romans 11:32-36, '32 For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.

<sup>33</sup> Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?"  
35 "Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?"  
36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.  
Amen.'

He makes a statement that any of us would be too embarrassed to make, that God sovereignly put all the elect Jews and Gentiles under sin in order to save them. And instead of looking at this statement and thinking that God looks bad Paul launches into worship. He wonders at God's inscrutability.